

## Notes and Additions<sup>1</sup>

Translation and Notes by Bruce Rosenstock

Digital Supplement to *Mendelssohn's Last Works* (University of Illinois Press, 2012)

One of the most penetrating thinkers of our age had the kindness to read through my lectures and to share with me certain notes on them that I do not want to withhold from my readers.

Page 55 [32of *JubA* 3/2]

*can only belatedly condemn*]<sup>2</sup> This remark is so correct and useful! Perhaps one could expand upon it with the following remark? – As soon as we have learned, through the comparison of our sensations etc., to be able to judge the distances [of the objects of our sensations from us], the representation of our sight and our hearing is no longer *in* our body, but *outside* it – over there on the wall, over there in the street. As long as the sensory impact is not so powerful as to cause us pain (the experience of the person who is born blind and then acquires sight is like this), we actually have no awareness of the sensory organ itself. If we happen not to have noticed the layout of our surroundings, we wouldn't know where exactly the thing we saw or heard was situated. We never see the little reversed visual representation in our eyes, to say nothing of the excitation of the nerves that proceed to the brain: all this just seems to be an effect of light that doesn't just happen in us, but extends far outside us. Thus we don't really know if we hear something with one or the other ear or with both unless we put our hand over each ear in turn. – Here therefore the illusion of the object in space is able to be explained, and consequently our impression of the location [of our sensation] can never prove that it is one object and the same object rather than a number of objects that brings about our perception.

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*you have placed your trust in an inferential procedure that does not always prove reliable*]<sup>3</sup> Very well explicated! And actually an image in water or a mirror is every bit as untrustworthy and deceptive as the rainbow because it is entirely dependent upon the position of the observer. Therefore, to put it as a general rule: we are accustomed to assume that an object is *there* where the rays that touch our eyes direct us; and therefore we fall into error in locating an object whose ray is broken. And we are accustomed to assume that an object's surface has a certain quality or that it is made of a transparent

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- 1 The “penetrating thinker” is J. A. H. Reimar, brother of Elise who played such an important role in sending Jacobi's first letter about Lessing's “Spinozism” to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn himself adds a few comments to his friends notes in what follows, and the last comment is also his.
  - 2 This note basically argues that our senses are constantly excited by a sensory swarm, so to speak, of light and sound and feelings and tastes, and that we learn to infer the position of objects slowly, but never with certainty. We may find that what we see as one object is really a number of objects whose light effects produce the impression of a single object, or we may think that we are hearing something ahead of us when it is to the side. We cannot inspect the sensation at the level of our sensory organs to learn what is in fact the inciting impression; we must do our best to reconstruct the spatial world around us from the welter of excitations that constantly affect us.
  - 3 In this note Reimar continues to defend the idea that we locate sensations on the basis of our habit of inferring from the direct line of the light ray reflected from an object the position of the object itself. However, this habit does not always lead to a correct conclusion, if the ray of light has been refracted through a bending medium. Furthermore, we attribute colors to a surface when the ray is divided, as happens with a prism, and only one part of the ray is reflected back to us. Reimar is reinforcing Mendelssohn's point that we do not have an immediate grasp of objects with their qualities, but only a mediated and inferential construction of the object with its spatial position and qualities, based upon the raw data provided by our sense organs.

material when that sort of divided ray reaches our eyes that we call colored, and therefore we assign a color to that location which is in our direct sight line.

Page 77-8 [42 of *JubA* 3/2]

If there are *persistent* sensory impressions in our brain and it can be shown that we have the ability to use them [as we will], it is possible that Helvetius, whom I have not read, could say the following in his defense: for every word that has a corresponding general concept there is a certain privately [*heimlich*] assigned image, and we make use of it when we imagine the concept *intuitively*, since we are unable to imagine a tree or a man as an abstraction. And as for words that have no assigned image, these are signs of connection, division, relationship, etc., as =, +, ÷, √, and all those others that the Abbot of l'Epée uses to educate the deaf and dumb in his sign language. – It is undeniable that in every memory there is a certain general idea that may have no accompanying word. The deaf and dumb person recognizes the face of Voltaire facing right or left or looking straight ahead just as well as someone who has heard the name, since associated with the idea [of the face of Voltaire] there corresponds a generic image of the face of Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> Or one can recognize the same melody that certainly has no verbal description, even if one has not seen the notes, whether it is played in a higher or lower octave, whether it is played faster or slower, or by whether it is sung, or played on a violin, a piano, a flute, or bells, all of which certainly make a very different sensory impression. – What therefore do words contribute to abstract or precise thinking that makes them seem so necessary? It seems to me that the word allows the general concept to be distinguished and defined by its proper class or genus, or qualitative grade, or characteristic, or relationship, and so forth, when otherwise the concept would have a hazy and undefined boundary, lacking clarity. For example, [to go from more to less bounded words], Man, Animal, Body, Thing; Cottage, House, Dwelling; hot, burning, and so on. Thus language is a gift to be admired, for without it we would not only be incapable of communicating our ideas, but even of grasping them in their specificity, so that we would never acquire clarity of thought. The visible signs of the Abbot of l'Epée, or of his Viennese students whom Nicolai describes, are rather deficient in this capacity, since they cannot make fine verbal distinctions [but must rely entirely on imagistic schemata]. For example, [one sign must be used for the ideas of] being together, being beside another, being connected, joined, glued, pasted, nailed, cemented, and so on. Should a deaf and dumb person acquire speech and attempt to relay to us something of his former method of thinking—one should say that his thinking never was firmly in possession of memories of its prior processes—I think that it would somewhat resemble animal thinking—basically particular images—however much the power of comparison, the very essence of reasoning, may have strained towards that of the hearing person—and also immediate connections between causes and effects, and among related terms, and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

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4 The point is that the concept “face of Voltaire” has a certain schematic image associated with it, and that someone who has no use of words can still make use of the schematic image. Thus, words do not have to be pure signs without intuitive content, as Mendelssohn says they would be according to Helvetius. Helvetius could reply that there are also schematic images that are associated with words.

5 Riemarus seems to be saying that the schematic image used in relation to concepts (like the schematic image of a tree) does not permit of differentiation and comparison. Thus, a schematic tree, while it applies to any tree, is not able to be differentiated into oak, apple, and so on, without the specific words for each species of tree. Thus, the deaf and dumb person thinks in schematic pictures, and is thus limited in his ability to draw fine distinctions among objects. Of course, the ability to make fine distinctions does not depend upon speech, but rather upon the uses to which speech is put, as in the famous case of the many words for types of snow in Eskimo languages that are due to the variety of uses to which snow is put.

*Alteration without that which endures through the alteration is unthinkable.*] I once spent great effort at working through an essay in *Deutsches Museum* called “On the Ego”, and I hoped to give it further reflection, but I never had the opportunity. As far as I caught the author's intention and can recall it now, he wanted to raise doubts about our temporal endurance in the following manner: Our consciousness of our personality or of our endurance rests only upon our memory of what we previously experienced. If this memory were extinguished, we would not be persuaded that we were one and the same being that exists in various situations and that experiences those alterations. If through some derangement a different series of memories were to replace ours, we would think ourselves to be some other being, a king perhaps, or an animal, or even a lifeless thing, a barleycorn perhaps, or the like. And if one were to give that series of memories to someone else, together with the images that accompany them, he would think he had experienced them himself. Every element of the series can be placed in a different sequence, and as a consequence everything can be changed. So long as the change is gradual so that the series retains about the same order as before, and one sees the same image as if one were looking into flowing water, the effect would remain the same. And thus our imagined consciousness of a being within us that endures and is the subject of alterations would be an illusion! – I wouldn't know how to answer this, if I didn't believe that I had shown that it was impossible for the impression of temporal endurance to be produced by putting together separate pieces of memory, since these would have to be heaped one upon the other, each different and unique and without serial order, but this sort of memory only calls back an *abstraction* of what we saw or heard, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

[Mendelssohn now adds the following five paragraphs written by himself:]

I trust I shall be allowed to add a few words to this note of my friend in order to clarify it for my own sake. I don't normally go in for hypotheses that verge on the far-fetched and that clearly treat of impossibilities as if they were possible just in order to investigate what consequences they entail. It's my opinion that that such hypotheses serve more for entertainment or, at best, as a means of sharpening one's wits or one's exercising one's inventiveness, than they do for the discovery of the truth. What would be the consequence if we could put the head of a lion on the body of a rabbit, or if the earth were suddenly lighter than air, or if we could give life and feeling to a column in a building, or if we could remove the brain and all the nerves from one body and insert them into another body? – The hypothesis of the author of the essay in *Deutsches Museum* seems to be asking for something similar, as if we lived in a fairy-tale world.

Now I'll freely admit that if the soul, as a number of philosophers would have it, stands in front of a desk with many drawers and has nothing else to do but but read out the signs and impressions that she finds inside, then indeed it would make no difference to the soul what kind of letters or signs she found. One set can be replaced conveniently with another without the least additional trouble to the soul. The case is similar to how a printer can set up just as readily a manuscript of Reimarus as one of Schwedenborg, just so long as the handwriting is legible. But that's not how things are constituted with

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<sup>6</sup> The point is that memories are not discrete, but come with a certain *thickness*, or relation to what precedes and follows.

the soul of a living being, it seems to me. She doesn't have to merely *read out* [the signs], she has to *interpret* them, so to speak. She has to take them over from the body and render them in her own psychic language, explain them and construe them. Therefore she must be familiar with all the turns of phrase and expressions of that primary script and must be connate with, nourished with, raised with and educated with the author of that script that she calls her body, at least if she wants to correctly understand it and faithfully translate it. If we give her a new desk, she's no longer at home; it's like being among a foreign people: she doesn't understand them, and she can't make herself understood.

And if the Almighty were to bind up another soul [in place of mine] with the body that I now call my own, how, one might well ask, would this newly engaged pair behave?

I'll answer at first in the same way that the comic poet<sup>7</sup> makes that tight-fisted guardian answer when his love-lorn ward asks permission to make a proposal to his beloved: *What is she going to bring with her?* The new soul cannot be so completely impoverished as bring nothing with when she enters my body. She must have inherited some property, or at least have received a dowry. She wouldn't carry herself into her new body completely empty of all concepts. She would never understand its speech, and wouldn't be able to do a thing with it, and there would never be any linkage between her and her body unless she were in every respect like the soul that now inhabits my body. As it is, she agrees in every characteristic with my body down to the smallest detail, and without this exact harmony there would be no possible connection between body and soul. – If a natural scientists attempts to form some sort of a hybrid that does not occur in nature, he may at the very least force nature's hand and produce, instead of a perfect being, a monstrosity or a hermaphroditic creature. But with the soul and body, if they are not made for one another, one cannot expect any result whatsoever. They will not mate or copulate, and the linkage between them that the Omnipotent is supposed to establish will be nothing more than an empty hope.

As long as my body remains as it is, no spirit can be breathed into it that is differently formed than the one I presently possess. The Omnipotent must completely restructure my body's traits in order to bring it into relation with and adapt it to a new soul. But if there were to be done, a different human being would have come into being, someone with a different body and soul. This human being would be no longer the previous “I” nor would there remain the previous “mine,” and this human would no longer fit within the same space and time in which I now find myself, since it is in relation to this place and time that I now have discovered, conforming to what is for the best, my *where* and my *when*.

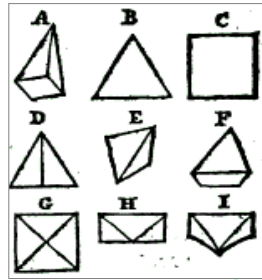
But let it be posited that the new soul is exactly the same in its characteristics as the one that now dwells within me, and that it therefore matches up just as well with my body as my current soul does, then the linkage will have been properly set up. On the other hand, it is hardly a *different* soul which will have been given to me. It cannot be distinguished from my current soul, and that which is indistinguishable from something else is actually and as a matter of fact not different from that other thing. It is and remains forever *the same soul*, although we are using different words to refer to it. Since even if the Omnipotent were to make the old soul into a brand new soul, it would not for that reason lose its identity. It is like the way that the Omnipotent must be recreating each finite being at every instant of its continuous existence without in any way altering the identity of the being. If the Omnipotent couldn't recreate the identical being each instant, then continuous creation (as the Scholastics used to call the conservation of existing things through time) would be overturned.

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<sup>7</sup> Lessing, *Der Schatz*.

*we call this condition derangement for the same reason*) Our recent mystics call this “to be enraptured out of one's senses,” but in everyday language we put it quite well as “leaving one's senses.” This is in general a badly chosen example to use against the truth of our sensations, if indeed our inner sensations do deceive us. Not very long ago a man died in a nearby vicinity who had gotten himself into such a state through his incessant studying that he began to believe that he heard voices through his walls who would pronounce the words in his book before he read them, or who would on occasion carry on conversations with him. – What counsel could such a person take, or what test could he use, to free himself from this delusion? His psychic capacities have worked upon the inner apparatus of sensation as if it had been moved by outer causes, and so he ascribes these sensations to an outward stimulus even though he is perceiving only his own self-induced inner movements. The only remedy would be to examine every single possible *outward* circumstance. The man would learn that he is not dreaming and that everything else is in its normal and expected order. Only one phenomenon seems not to conform to the ordinary course of nature, and he may rightly suspect that there is something amiss about it. – The worst of it is that the sick man is not inclined or is not able to engage himself in these investigations.

I must mention here that also when we dream we may be unable to free ourselves from the illusion that what we are hearing and seeing is what others can also see and hear. The fact that our different sense organs do not produce a coherent set of matching sensations as they do real life is just not enough to prove to us that we are dreaming. – So is my late friend then really still alive? Yes, by all means, say all the characters in my dream – *there he comes – I am running toward him – I am embracing him, etc.* But when we compare outward phenomena among themselves, we quickly discover the difference between them and what we perceive in our dreams. In our dreams, hardly anything matches up among our perceptions, whether it be the time, position, or size of the force that is imagined to bring about some effect. But in waking life everything adds up: we find today the same house and the same people in the same neighborhood as yesterday. Nothing is just a matter of our chain of associations; nothing appears without an outward cause; no effect exceeds the force of its cause. In the waking world different phenomena have different causes, so that we are able to assure ourselves of the obvious difference between waking and dreaming, namely, that the latter is the merely subjective alteration of our psyche, whereas the former has a cause that is outside of ourselves. – And doesn't this difference offer evidence against the doctrine that says that everyone generates his perceptions out of himself without any of them being in reality an effect of another? Isn't it clear that the perceptions we spin out of our own head are completely different in their interrelations and their very nature?



*false if we take it as a complete representation of the landscape*) The perspectival representation [of a landscape] shows quite well how it is that images produced by our senses can possess a degree of truth. Let me use an example to give a concrete and visible rendering of the matter at hand. The four-sided pyramid A is rotating in the air so that all of its sides are equally illuminated so that it does offer to the eye any hint of the fact that it is a three-dimensional body. Now let it be viewed from various standpoints. One person looks at it from below and says, speaking about C: it is a simple square. Another person sees it as B and says, it is a triangle. Another looks at it two sides (either straight on or from a point above the pinnacle and to the side) and sees D and says, it is two combined right angles. No, according to the view given in E it is two unequal triangles combined – according the F view it is a trapezoid and a triangle – according to G I it is a crisscrossed square – according to H it is a long rectangle divided into three triangles – and according to the view given in I it is three unequal triangles. All of these can be imagined as perspectival representations of the same object and therefore each has its element of truth. But only someone who compares all of these images found in the first figure and discovers their common agreement can uncover the basis for the various appearances. These various appearances therefore do not in the least prove that there is no common, objectively true basis for all of them. Thus far, my friend, –

*Questions* merit a special logical consideration in regard to how they are typically framed in a particular way in our language. Harris in his *Hermes, or a philosophical inquiry concerning a universal grammar*<sup>9</sup> has written the following about this:

It may be observed of the Interrogative that as often as the Interrogation is simple and definite the Response may be made in almost the same Words by converting them into a sentence affirmative or negative according as the truth is either one or the other. For example, *Are these Verses of Homer?* Response: *These Verses are of Homer. Are those*

<sup>8</sup> This section in Lecture VII of *Morning Hours* deals specially with the question of Kant's "thing in itself." Mendelssohn argues that it is meaningless to inquire about the thing in itself since all that can ever be known about a thing is whatever it is possible for our epistemic capacities to discover about it. In this comment, Reimar expands upon Mendelssohn's anti-Kantian position.

<sup>9</sup> The first edition of the work: James Harris, *Hermes, or a philosophical inquiry concerning language and universal grammar*, J. Nourse and P. Vaillant, 1751. The quotation from Harris is found in footnote f on page 151. I have simply provided Harris's original words. Reimar's German translation of the passage seems to have been his own.

*Verses of Virgil?* Response: *Those are not Verses of Virgil.* And here the Artists of Language for the sake of brevity and dispatch have provided two Particles to represent all such Responses: Yes for all the affirmative No for all the negative. But when the Interrogation is complex as when we say *Are these Verses of Homer or of Virgil* much more when it is indefinite as when we say in general *Whose are these Verses*, We cannot then respond after the manner above mentioned. The Reason is that no Interrogation can be answered by a simple Yes or a simple No except only those which are themselves so simple as of two possible answers to admit only one. Now the least complex Interrogation will admit of four Answers, two affirmative, two negative, if not perhaps of more. The reason is, a complex Interrogation cannot subsist of less than two simple ones, each of which may be separately affirmed and separately denied. For instance *Are these Verses Homer's or Virgil's*: 1. *They are Homer's* 2. *They are not Homer's* 3. *They are Virgil's* 4 *They are not Virgil's*. We may add, *They are of neither*. The indefinite Interrogations go still farther, for these may be answered by infinite affirmatives and infinite negatives. For instance, *Whose are these Verses?* We may answer affirmatively *They are Virgil's*, *They are Horace's*, *They are Ovid's*, &c, or negatively. *They are not Virgil's*, *They are not Horace's*, *They are not Ovid's*, and so on either way to infinity. How then should we learn from a single Yes or a single No which particular is meant among infinite Possibles? These therefore are Interrogations which must be always answered by a Sentence. Yet even here Custom has consulted for Brevity by returning for Answer only the single essential characteristic Word and retrenching by an Ellipsis all the rest, which rest the Interrogator is left to supply from himself. Thus when we are asked *How many right angles equal the angles of a triangle*, we answer in the short monosyllable *Two* whereas without the Ellipsis the answer would have been *Two right angles equal the angles of a triangle*. The Ancients distinguished these two Species of Interrogation by different names The simple they called *erotema*, Interrogatio, the complex, *pusma*, Percontatio.

Thus far Harris.

These distinctions are not incorrect, yet they do not seem to get to the bottom of the matter, and they do not supply enough light on the issue. A clear definition of the words will help us to better set out the concepts and to provide the logical foundation for the remarks of the English writer. So: What is a question?

It is obvious that every time a question is posed, the individual wants to discover a way to expand a defective sentence and make it whole. The answer removes the deficiency and transforms a given incomplete sentence into a complete one.

For example: – – *Who is the author of the Iliad?* – The question word *Who* stands here in place of the unknown subject. The answer names the subject: *Homer*. Now the sentence is complete: *Homer is the author of the Iliad*. – *What is the Iliad?* – The little word *What* stands in the place of the unknown predicate. The answer names the predicate. – *A epic poem of Homer*, and in this way it expands the sentence. – *The Iliad is an epic poem of Homer*. It is therefore not necessary to assume, as Harris does, that the response is marked by its brevity. The person providing the answer needs only provide that sentence part which is lacking in the question. The questioner replaces the unknown part with the question word, much as in algebra an unknown quantity can be indicated with X, Y, or Z. The answerer points to the value that can be placed in the position of the sign so that the sentence becomes complete and definite.

The grammatical case of the interrogative word tells us the part of the sentence that needs to be filled in. The nominative *who* or *what* points to the main part of the sentence, the subject or the predicate, as

we saw in the previous examples. The accusative *whom* or *what* indicates that the missing part of the sentence is the object. *Whom did Homer select as the hero of the Iliad?* Answer: *Achilles*. The ablative indicates the source from which something comes, *whence*; the dative indicates the point toward which something is going, *whither*; and the genitive indicates the relationship in which some noun stands with respect to the subject or predicate of the sentence. For example, *Whose epic poem is the Iliad.* Answer: *Homer's*. The sentence corresponding to the question is, *The Iliad is an epic poem of X*. The subject [*Iliad*] and the predicate [*epic poem*] are given, but what is lacking is the noun that stands in relation to the predicate. The sentence expresses this noun only through a mere sign [*X*], or through the interrogative pronoun, *Whose*. The answer follows with a noun in the same case [as the sign or pronoun], *of Homer*; and now the sentence is complete: *The Iliad is an epic poem of Homer*.

In all these cases the a main part of the sentence, either the subject or the predicate, remained undefined, either because it was completely unknown or because it remained undefined in some particular aspect. The sentence thus had to be expressed in an incomplete form. The answer by which the deficient sentence is made whole might be one among a limited number of alternatives that the questioner can't make up his mind about. Or perhaps the missing part of the sentence is entirely unknown to the questioner, and in the case the possible answers are infinitely many. For example, *Who wrote these verses?* As many names as one can think of, that is how many possible answers there are. But if the questioner is able to limit his options to a certain number of objects about which he is unsure which is the correct one, then that is exactly how many possible answers there are, whether affirmatively or negatively expressed. *Are these verses by Horace, Vergil or Ovid?* Here the question asks about a not completely unknown predicate, but limits its range to three persons, so that there are six possible answers, three positively expressed and three negatively expressed. Harris actually adds one more possible answer: *The verses are by none of them*. But this is not so much an answer as it is an explanation of why the question is poorly or improperly expressed because it has limited its options to a number that cannot accommodate any truthful answer at all. It has offered three possible authors, but none of them is the right one.

This is therefore the sort of question that the ancients called *erotema* (*Interrogatio*). As Harris has claimed, the question is neither compound nor multiple, but in itself really quite simple. If there are multiple answers, it is because of the nature of the concept under discussion. It consists in the expression of a sentence which is incomplete, lacking either the subject or predicate, whether it is entirely missing or lacking in one particular respect or aspect. As a consequence, there is a felt need to remedy the incompleteness through an answer.

If, however, the major parts of the sentence, the subject and the predicate, are present and defined, and the question rests merely in respect to the quality of the sentence as a whole, then the questioner precisely wants to know whether to assert or deny the sentence, and the answer can only be either the affirmation or denial of the truth of the sentence. The answer in fact can be the simple part of speech [*yes* or *no*] without any need for a cultivated linguistic skill at shortening sentences, as Harris asserts. For example, *Are these verses by Homer? Have you seen the white bear?* The subject and the predicate are present and definite, The only thing that remains doubtful is the quality of the copula, and therefore the answer cannot be other than an affirmation or denial of the sentence.

This sort of question is what the ancients called *pusma*, *Percontatio*, or as we might say in German, *forschen* [investigating]. Socrates made use of this kind of questioning when he wanted to draw out a student and lead him to the truth. He would express his question with its subject and predicate as precisely as possible so that the student had only to answer *Yes* or *No*. The same sort of question is used in a courtroom when witnesses or the accused are being interrogated. The parts of the sentence are reduced to their simplest and clearest possible form so that the answerer has only to assent to or deny what is being asked of him.



These subtleties, so comically rendered by Lawrence Sterne in his questions about the white bear, have actually some useful results.<sup>10</sup> All questions must be answerable; they must consist in an incomplete sentence that can be made into complete, comprehensible, and logically consistent sentences through a possible answer. As soon as it is demonstrated that the sentence which the question calls upon one to complete cannot in any way whatsoever be so completed, in other words, that the sought-after complete sentence, considered in and of itself, is not able to be conceived, then we must throw out the question as inadmissible. It seems to me that a great many questions which philosophers spend huge amounts of effort trying to answer are of this type. They demand to be completed by sentences that, in and of themselves, can never be supplied. The questions are searching for something that not only falls outside of the experience of human beings, but also falls outside of experience as such.<sup>11</sup> In the text to which this note is attached we find several examples of questions of this sort that seem to me to be inadmissible. Let me be permitted to add here a few other instances.

### First Instance

What are things in and of themselves, apart from all sensations, imaginings, or concepts? This question belongs, in my opinion, the class of unanswerable questions. The incomplete sentence that is contained in the question is *Things apart from all sensations, imaginings, or concepts are in and of themselves = X*. If the question is a valid one, then this sentence must allow itself to be completed in such a way that the unknown something becomes a known something, so that *X* becomes an *A*, and the sentence thus becomes conceivable in its completeness. Let's posit that things in and of themselves apart from any sensations, imaginings, or concepts = *A*. But now *A* obviously cannot be thought of as equivalent to *X*, since in so far as *A* is something that can be conceived, sensed, or imagined, then it does not serve as a fitting answer to the question. The incomplete sentence cannot therefore be made complete through any possible answer. The question as such is in and of itself unanswerable.

### Second Instance

*What is the underlying substrate of all accidents that can be found in a substance?* This question, which Locke has devoted himself to so extensively, is unanswerable, it seems to me, for the following reason. Let's posit that the sought-after substrate is *A*. In so far as *A* is conceivable at all, or classifiable, or imaginable, it belongs among the accidents and does not serve as a fitting answer to the

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10 In *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Book V, Chapter 43, Tristram explains how his father could hold forth on any topic about which he had no knowledge, simply by asking a stock set of questions about the topic. His father takes the example of "the white bear": "A white bear! Very well. Have I ever seen one? Might I ever have seen one? Am I ever to see one? Ought I ever to have seen one? Or can I ever see one? Would I had seen a white bear! (for how can I imagine it!) If I should see a white bear what should I say? If I should never see a white bear, what then? If I never have, can, must, or shall see a white bear alive, have I ever seen the skin of one? Did I ever see one painted? Described? Have I never dreamed of one? Did my father, mother, uncle, aunt, brothers, or sisters ever see a white bear? What would they give? How would they behave? How would the white bear have behaved? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth? Is the white bear worth seeing? Is there no sin in it? Is it better than a black one?"

11 Reimarus is here drawing upon Kant's argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that there is an insurmountable limit to experience as such, not only human experience. Kant argues that the condition of possibility of experience as such is that it be of an object localizable in space and time. Kant goes on to argue that the "thing in itself" is therefore outside the range of any possible experience. Reimarus argues that it is simply inadmissible to ask a question about the thing in itself, based on the general grammar of the question, or what we might call the question "language game." Therefore, it makes no sense to ask about the object of experience, "What is it like apart from any experience of it?" The question being inadmissible, the answer that it is "the thing in itself" is simply empty of sense. In the First Instance, Reimarus offers a detailed explanation of why the "thing in itself" is an empty phrase.

question. There is therefore no possible answer in which this substrate can be given.<sup>12</sup>

### Third Instance

*Does our entire universe move in space?* This is a question raised by Newton. Can this universe be shifted over and change its position in empty space? If this question is answerable, then it must be possible for some thinking being to pick out one of the two following sentences as true and the other as false: *This universe has changed its place* and *This universe has not changed its place*. But according to our assumption, the truth of either sentence cannot be decided, since in *empty* space there are no markers whereby any thinking being could tell the difference between the parts of space, or distinguish different places. It is therefore appropriate for Leibniz to have dismissed this question as unanswerable. The same result applies in the case of time. *Could this actual entire sequence of things in time have had an earlier starting-point?* The answer, for the exact same reason, falls in the realm of the impossible.

### Fourth Instance

I am of the opinion that the well-known question raised by physiologists about the medium through which sensations are transmitted is also of this nature. It ends up being a question that in and of itself is unanswerable. *What is the medium*, one asks, *through which the qualities of objects are transmitted?* Some declare it to be a fluid matter, others say it is elastic and fibrous. Still others say it is a very fine kind of matter, like aether; or it is compared to electric matter. Every answer agrees that the medium is some sort of matter. But matter cannot be identified except through sensible properties (*qualitates sensibiles*). Whatever we are able to know about this matter, consists entirely in the sensible properties that it conveys to us, and in the characteristics that we can discern in it. We are trying, therefore, to identify the medium of all sensible properties by means of its own sensible properties. We want to identify the essence of something that transmits to us sensible properties while we admit that it cannot be identified by us except through similar sensible properties. – I no longer trust myself when I find that I have gotten myself caught in such a problematic circle. So many clever minds have engaged with this question without being able to settle on one answer that I more and more fear that the question has not been properly framed. I will be grateful to anyone who takes the trouble of sharing with me his better wisdom and shedding light on this famous controversy.

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<sup>12</sup> In this instance, Reimarús seems to be trading on the ambiguity of the copula, “is,” which can mean “is identical to” or “has the property of being ...” If one wants to know what the underlying substrate is apart from all properties or accidents, one is asking to be told what the substrate is identical to. But Reimarús seems to think that a statement of identity, S is identical to A, can be cashed out as a subject-predicate sentence, S has the property of being A. Any property is an accident predicated of the subject, so that the underlying substrate is now being identified with (or by) an accident, when the question asked about the substrate apart from all accidents.

### Fifth Instance

A remarkable example of this sort is provided by the doubt raised by certain philosophers concerning the persistence of a substance. What criteria can be employed by which to determine whether a substance remains self-identical from one moment to the next? Even when it concerns a spiritual substance, there is no security in any criterion, since consciousness and the memory of one's prior condition do not provide certainty in the matter. Consciousness and memory are present states that are linked inseparably to the mind, and this would hold true whether the mind's substance were discontinuous or persistent. There is simply no criterion whereby to distinguish the one substance from the other.

And thus I reply: because of the very fact that no criterion can be found whereby to tell the difference between the two sorts of substance, the investigation is a nonstarter. It is nonsensical to seek to find the difference between things that one is convinced cannot be told apart in and of themselves. When the characteristics and properties of a discontinuous substance are precisely those that would be found in a persistent substance, then the one simply cannot be distinguished from the other, and even the most perfect being would have to consider them as one and the same, that is, they would be one and the same. The substance would remain the same and not undergo any change. Things that are not able to be distinguished must not in fact be different things. Whatever cannot be identified, cannot be. That which is sought lies not only outside the bounds of finite human knowledge, but outside the bounds of the knowable altogether, and falls on the side of what is simply incoherent.

Page 273 [Mendelssohn is the author of this note, as a further reflection on Lessing's deep distress at the way his *Nathan the Wise* had been received]

The words of my unforgettable friend, conveyed to me in the last message I received from his hand by a traveler who had just come from visiting him, still ring through my soul. Several years had passed since either I or our mutual friend Nicolai had received any letter from him, and he owed us replies to several of our letters. This situation was not at all a cause for worry; he was, as is well known to his friends, not the most assiduous of letter writers. He was dilatory even when it came to answering simply for the sake of keeping up the exchange of friendly greetings without any further content. So I was quite eager to open the brief note that the stranger had delivered to me. Now it needs to be said that L[essing], in all the years I had known him and in all the many circumstances and situations of his life, had not once expressed anger at any ingratitude shown to him by his contemporaries. He had never complained about any injustice that had been done to him, nor had he complained when his services had not been appropriately appreciated. Never was a word of complaint heard from him such as one so often hears from others at far slighter provocations. I practically never heard the words *I* and *my* come out of his mouth. And, as to his letters, they were always lively and full of varied and original reflections. They could reflect every sort of mood, except never a sense of defeat or failure of nerve. He was ever the friend who offered consolation, never the one who needed it. And thus I do not have words to describe my reaction as I read the following lines from a man entirely different from the one I knew, a bent-over, worn-down fighter who had at last succumbed. He was like a hunted and exhausted deer who finally collapses and, drained of his power to fight, allows his noble antlers to sink in the dust:

“Dearest Friend,

“The traveler<sup>13</sup> whom you sent to me a while ago was a somewhat inquisitive traveler. But the one I am sending to you is emigrating to other parts. At the present time, this sort of traveler is hardly ever one of the class of Yorik [that is, men 'of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy,' like the clown Yorick]; it is only the luckless, innocent traveler who seems to be found in this class [ie, the class of emigrants]. And why is it not preferable to be a member of this new class than to place oneself in a class with such an indecorous appellation [ie, 'clown', the 'class of Yorick']? Perhaps because one's misfortune is not entirely innocent, since one is guilty at least of a lack of perspicacity.

Actually, he is named \*\*\*\*\*, this emigrant, and that he has been sorely treated by our people, in his defense of yours, I can witness on his behalf. He wants nothing from you, dear Moses, except that you show him the shortest and surest route to that European land where there are neither Christians nor Jews. I am sad to see him leave, but as soon as he finds his new home, I will be the first to follow him there.

In response to that brief letter which D Flies brought to me from you a while ago, I am still chewing and sucking on it. I find that juicy words suit my refined palate best. You understand, dear friend, that a letter like that is necessary every once and a while if one is not to become too dispirited. I don't think you know me to be a man who is hungry for praise. But the coldness which the world typically and unfairly shows to certain people is paralyzing if not entirely death-dealing. That there are things that I wrote over the years that don't please you, is not surprising to me. Nothing had to be pleasing to you since nothing was written for you. At most, there might be one or two passages that could match up with memories of some of our better days together. And I was such a healthy, slim shoot back then, and now I am such a rotten and gnarled old trunk! Oh, dear friend, this scene is played out! I certainly would love to talk with you once again!

Wolfenbüttel, 10 December 1780”

Gladly would I have offered you consolation, dear heart. Gladly would I have torn myself from my business and my family and run to your side to speak with you once more. But, sadly, I managed things no better than how we so often manage things we begin to do. I delayed and postponed until it was too late. Ah, these were the last words I received from him!

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<sup>13</sup> The conceit of Lessing's letter is that the letter itself is a traveler and not simply sent in the hands of a traveler, and also that the mood of the traveler-letter reflects the mood of the writer.